Arguing About ASEAN

‘Is the celebrated “ASEAN Way” any longer appropriate, useful, or fit for purpose?’ This was the question posed by the guest editor of a Special Issue of ASEAN in the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*. It is also an easy one to answer. If the ASEAN Way is understood as a deliberately-construed informal, non-legalised and weakly-institutionalised pattern of regionalism, then it has run its course in Southeast Asia, or at least has experienced a substantial decline. What is more important, its decline could be traced to even before the 1997 regional economic crisis, at least to the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), conceived in 1992 and the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Treaty, signed in 1995. The 1997 crisis did nonetheless provide a good deal of the recent impetus for institutional change in ASEAN that would undermine the ASEAN Way. The best proof of this comes from the substance of initiatives undertaken in the past years by the organisation itself, such as the ASEAN Charter, the ASEAN Economic Community, and the ASEAN Political-Security Community, etc. In particular, the initiative for a Charter was ‘aimed at transforming ASEAN from being a non-binding political association to becoming an international organisation with a legal personality and a rule-based organisation with an effective and efficient organisational structure.’ As such, at least in intent, if not yet in reality, the biggest blow to the ASEAN Way understood in the above sense comes from the ASEAN members themselves. The damage to the ASEAN Way is deliberate and self-inflicted act, a fact little recognized in the academic writings on ASEAN.

But if the ASEAN Way refers to the larger framework of norms and role conceptions, including engagement of outside great powers, peaceful management of disputes, promoted by the organization, then it remains important in shaping the purpose and direction of the institution. Moreover, if the term conjures up a set of constructed and occasionally but not always stereotyped notions about how ASEAN survives and deals with the challenges it faces, then it is difficult to look beyond the ASEAN Way in analysing and assessing ASEAN. In an important sense, the ASEAN Way is an invention of its critics. Few academic scholars recognise that the initial usage of this term by ASEAN policymakers was meant to connote not so much uniqueness, but the obvious potential for dysfunction. But as ASEAN survived and even to some extent flourished, the ASEAN Way took on a more positive meaning, but it has always been more powerful in provoking criticism than admiration; the so-called ASEAN Way is not so much celebrated, as maligned.

Against this backdrop, my main argument in this limited set of concluding observations is that a good deal of the debate over ASEAN concerns what to disagree about, for there remain a number of myths and uncertainties about what ASEAN is and what concepts and criteria one should use to evaluate it. As a result, ASEAN remains an essentially contested institution. In different ways, contributions to this collection confirm the myth of the ASEAN way as a central idea in analytical discourses about ASEAN, while also demolishing the myth that writings about ASEAN tend to reflect a groupthink, lacking diversity and richness.

What do scholars and observers of ASEAN argue about and what are the sources of their argument? First, they are not sure whether and to what extent should ASEAN be seen as a successful regional organisation. ASEAN, as its critics correctly point out, is not the most successful regional grouping in the developing world. But this should never be a point of
contention because such a claim has never been made by the association. Moreover, evaluating such a claim requires a comparative perspective. A comparative perspective may put ASEAN in a more favourable light than the pessimists allow. ‘Success’ here is not to be measured in terms of its longevity, as Beeson correctly points out. There are regional groupings which are older, but have fared less well, like the Organisation of American States (especially if one views it as a successor to the pan-American union, founded in 1889-90), the League of Arab States (established in 1949), and even the African Union (renamed from Organization of African Unity (created in 1963). Admittedly, these are macroregional bodies, with a larger and more diverse membership, while ASEAN, alongside the Pacific Islands Forum (formerly the South Pacific Forum, 1971), the Economic Community of West African States (1975), the Gulf Cooperation Council (1981), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (1985) the MERCOSUR (1991, although an earlier 1985 economic integration agreement between Brazil and Argentina could be rightly regarded as its genesis), and the SCO (2001) are more compact, relatively more homogenous subregional bodies, therefore supposedly easier to maintain and manage. But even among these, ASEAN compares favourably, a claim recognised not the least in the consistent attendance at its annual post-ministerial meetings of the representatives of all the major powers of the contemporary international system. Unfortunately, the academic literature on ASEAN tend to engage rarely on comparative analysis. In this collection, Aris’ comparison between ASEAN and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), offers not only a welcome exception to this trend, but also an excellent reminder of the special insights to be gained from a comparative approach, which incidentally bears out ASEAN’s relevance more than its limitations. Moreover, comparative research and studies would suggest that regional institutions ought to be judged in terms of their own set goals, rather than some universal standard derived from the EU model. (Acharya and Johnston, 1997). More on this persisting ethnocentrism in the field of comparative regionalism later.

As with most things in life, the truth about ASEAN lies somewhere in between the extremes of viewing ASEAN either as a fantastically effective regional grouping (which to the best of my knowledge no has ever claimed on its behalf) and the somewhat vulgar characterisation of it as an incompetent and marginal talk shop of quarrelling Third World dictators. These essays capture this middle ground. Thus Shaun Narine argues that while ASEAN has been a poor promoter of democracy and human rights, it also has a better potential to mediate in great power conflicts. For Jurgen Haacke, the ASEAN-led ARF has yet to make significant institutional progress, but it is beginning to make ‘significant moves’ towards dealing with transnational issues such as piracy, terrorism and natural disasters. ASEAN’s role in East Asian regionalism demonstrates ‘potent agency,’ claims Ba, but also the constraints in reconciling its regional and global interests and imperatives. And in the crucial arena of regional production networks, Felker demonstrates how ASEAN countries have used cooperative ‘techno-regionalist’ strategies that turn emerging competition among China, Japan and the Western industrial powers into their advantage by ‘virtue of their greater “reliability”’ as a non-threatening partner for global production and innovation.’ Such a strategy usefully complement ASEAN’s political and strategic engagement of Asian great powers through the ARF, and together foreclose the possibility of a overly hierarchical or hegemonic regional order under Chinese or Japanese dominance. Surely, that could count as a desirable state of regional order, even from a Eurocentric perspective on order and security.

A second source of arguments about ASEAN relates to the fact that perceptions of ASEAN’s performance tend to change rather dramatically in keeping with developments in the
regional and world stage. The more positive view of ASEAN prevailing in the early 1990s, based largely on its diplomacy in the Cambodian conflict, gave way to profound pessimism in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis. Some had written off ASEAN, just as it had been written off in the late 1960s over the outbreak of the Malaysia-Philippine Sabah dispute. My point here, without the benefit of a fuller discussion of the merits of the wide ranging views on ASEAN, is not to dismiss their merits, but to simply stress that judgements on ASEAN tend to be based on short-term developments. ASEAN not only survived the Sabah dispute as well as the 1997 crisis, and in many respects, appears to have emerged more focused, if not entirely ‘reinvented’.

A third and related point of contention over ASEAN stems from the performance and conceptual criteria used to evaluate ASEAN’s role. As hinted, reviewing ASEAN’s performance and record, the academic or policy literature has found it hard to break with Eurocentric criteria, applied explicitly or implicitly, despite growing awareness of such a bias among academics and claim to at least try to overcome it. If a large gap exists between ASEAN’s official rhetoric and its actual record of cooperation, could it be due to the fact, as Jetschke provocatively proposes, that the ‘major impulses for cooperation [in ASEAN] have come from outside Southeast Asia, most importantly Europe’. The evidence for such mimicking is sketchy however, certainly, in the field of political and security cooperation. There is now plenty of archival and secondary evidence to show that while ASEAN members did look at the EU when they considered regional economic cooperation - and even here, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (1981: 44) of Malaysia would say in 1980 that ‘An economic community approach a la EEC would have made ASEAN a non-starter - for better or worse, the EU was used as a yardstick to think of what not to do in regional political and security cooperation. Indeed, a good case can be made that the EU was the institutional ‘other’ of the ASEAN ‘self’. Even while discussing an EU-style ASEAN Charter at a time when the EU has spectacularly failed to adopt its own constitution, ASEAN members looked at the EU as an ‘inspiration’, not a model. (Acharya 1997)

Moreover, it is difficult, given the paucity of theoretical writings on ASEAN, to separate those assessments of ASEAN which tend to take a pessimistic view of international institutions in general, including perspectives of neo-realists such as John Mearsheimer for who international institutions simply reflect great power preferences and are often marginal influences on state behaviour (Mearsheimer 1994-95), and those who are ethnocentrically sceptical of the ability of Southeast Asian, as a group of weak and relatively under developed nations, to manage creditable regional cooperation. Can such states manage diplomatic activism and success when they lack power resources? Such ethnocentric biases are not uncommon in the literature on international relations, and scholarship on ASEAN needs to pay much more attention to advancing this agenda.

Disagreement over definitions or deliberate disdain of theory also cloud evaluation of ASEAN. For example, a good deal of debate has taken place over whether ASEAN is or is not a ‘security community’. The concept, borrowed but redeveloped from the original writings of Karl Deutsch and his associates, connotes a situation of relationship among a group of states in which force is no longer considered as a legitimate means for dispute settlement. If one sticks to the original and somewhat singular Deutschian formulation, and even then disagreements about this abound, then ASEAN does not qualify as a security community. But concepts evolve, often through a process of adaptation, localisation and imitation. Hence, Adler and Barnett’s influential reformulation of the concepts carefully specifies a three stage development of pluralistic security communities: nascent, ascendant and mature. Going by the differentiated and
more nuanced analytic framework, one opens conceptual space for evaluating whether and where ASEAN ‘fits’ (to borrow from the editor’s term) the notion of a security community. Since the ‘nascent’ stage creates relatively low expectations, where members ‘coordinate their relations in order to: increase their mutual security; lower the transaction costs associated with their exchanges; and/or encourage further exchanges and interactions’, rather than displaying greater institutionalisation, supranationalism, a high degree of trust, and low or no probability of military conflicts which are characteristic of the ‘mature’ phase, (Adler and Barnett 1998: p.50).

ASEAN does fit the idea of a nascent security community. This may sound like splitting the hair, but conceptual analysis requires careful attention to nuances. Unfortunately, recent debates over the existence of, or prospects for, a security community in Southeast Asia has sometimes tended to ignore or overlook theoretical advances in the wider literature on international relations.

Fourth, there is a tendency in the literature to judge ASEAN’s recent policy initiatives from the prism of the old. While such scepticism is healthy and is a must for any scholarly debate, it also tends to areas where there have been genuine but step-by-step, advances. For example, ASEAN has undertaken a number of seemingly ambitious initiatives, such as the ASEAN Political-Security Community (which evolved from the ASEAN Security Community) and the ASEAN Charter. It is easy to be sceptical for some of these initiatives. Narine expresses particular doubt about the ASEAN Charter, citing the lack of fit between its normative aspiration for greater democracy and human rights and the dismal state of democracy and human rights within ASEAN states. He argues that ASEAN has a better prospect in mediating relations among the great powers than in promoting democracy and human rights within its member states. Yet, others may find ASEAN’s mediating role in Asian security affairs and its corollary, its ‘leadership’ role in Asian institutions like the ASEAN Regional Forum or the East Asian Summit, more problematic, increasingly challenged by the rising power and influence of China, Japan and India. And such a dichotomous view of internal democratic norms versus extra-ASEAN diplomatic ones ignores the crucial place of norms related to the problem of intra-ASEAN conflicts such as pacific management of disputes and non-use of force. This has been ASEAN’s most important claim to relevance and remains so, rather than any aspiration for human rights and democracy (which has never been part of ASEAN’s agenda and whose incorporation into the Charter and the ASEAN Political-Security Community was heavily contested and ultimately limited). These norms have been challenged by recent disputes between Singapore and Malaysia and Thailand and Burma and Cambodia (over the Preah Vihar temple), although an outright war has been averted.

Moreover, ASEAN’s attitude towards democracy and human rights has not been static. There are signs towards growing consultations with civil society groups (Eminent Persons’ Group on the ASEAN Charter, and the on the margins of the ASEAN summit in Hua Hun, Thailand in February 2009, although the scope of the latter was limited by protests from Cambodia and Burma). An ASEAN Human Rights body is evolving, although its functions will be limited to information gathering, not hearing complaints against ASEAN members). While Jones is right in drawing attention to the socio-economic interests motivating the regionally-oriented ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus, as opposed to the impact of the democratic institutions, there is little question that domestic political change, including the advent of democratic leadership and institutions at the national level has been a powerful impetus for institutional reform in ASEAN and shaping its policy of at least Indonesia towards Burma. Contrary to scepticism raised, evidence suggests that the more democratic members of
ASEAN have indeed been more receptive to institutional strengthening of ASEAN. The case of Indonesia, before and after the Suharto dictatorship, offers the most powerful example of this argument. In 1998, the Suharto’s Foreign Minister, Ali Alatas (who died in 2009), opposed his Thai counterpart Surin Pitsuwan’s idea, itself born out of Thailand’s democratic transition, of ‘flexible engagement’ which called on ASEAN to openly discuss domestic political issues in its member states if they carried regional implications. (The more pluralistic Philippines stood out as the major supporter of flexible engagement, in contrast to authoritarian Singapore.)

Yet, Indonesia after Suharto turned out to be the chief proponent of the idea of the ASEAN Security Community, whose initial concept paper (later diluted but not eliminated, due to opposition from other ASEAN members) sought to make democracy and human rights the ideological basis of ASEAN. And Indonesia proposed an ASEAN peacekeeping force (fiercely opposed by Singapore) that could intervene in internal conflicts in ASEAN. When critics pointed out that ASEAN peacekeeping force could end up being used mainly within ASEAN region, thereby violating its non-interference doctrine, the Indonesian response was that it would have no problem in such a force were to intervene within Indonesia itself. Indonesia did allow the deployment of outside observers to monitor the peace agreement on Aceh. The fact that Alatas’ Thai counterpart in 1998, Surin Pitswuan is now the ASEAN Secretary-General is not without irony and importance. His acceptance by fellow ASEAN members is itself indicative of changes in ASEAN’s attitudes towards political cooperation. And Indonesian parliamentary groups, empowered by democratic institutional reforms which gave them a voice over foreign affairs, have been more forceful in advocating political openness in ASEAN, including a more stringent attitude by Jakarta towards the Burmese dictatorship. Democratisation in Indonesia did open up space for foreign policy debate, if not decision-making, to groups who had been previously kept out of it.

A final myth in considering ASEAN’s relevance and role concerns the issue of its ‘leadership’ of wider regional institutions such as ARF, ASEAN-Plus-Three and EAS. In my view, its far more accurate to speak of ASEAN as the ‘hub’ than as the ‘leader’ of such Asia-Pacific and East Asian regional institutions. Surely ASEAN’s leadership cannot be a ‘structural’ one (Young), nor can it be a matter of ‘intellectual’ leadership since the ideational impetus for ARF came from Canada and Australia. Moreover, the term leadership is misleading because ASEAN’s main goal in responding to the wider regional groupings is not to appropriate them, but to prevent being marginalised by them. For example, ASEAN has never aspired to a ‘leadership’ role in Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation; it main goal, both with respect to APEC and the preceding epistemic discourses about a Pacific Economic Community upon which APEC was grafted, was to avoid marginalization (Acharya, 2009). Thus, ASEAN provided an acceptable and workable institutional foundation for the ARF after Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union, Gareth Evans of Australia, and Joe Clark of Canada, each came up in their own separate ways with the idea of an Asia Pacific version of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe, albeit with differing institutional models to implement the idea. Having a pre-existing institution into which the emerging norm of cooperative security could be grafted proved easier than establishing a brand new security institution which had no precedent for multilateral security cooperation beyond an ill-fated SEATO. Without ASEAN’s steering, it is unlikely that China would have participated in the ARF. In the case of the EAS and the putative East Asian Community, ASEAN is in some sense leading by default since neither Japan nor China, the two major powers of East Asia, are neutralised by their mutual rivalry from providing such leadership.
In short, ASEAN remains and shall remain, a contested institution, even more so now than in the past. However, these contestations rarely apply comparative perspective, or uniform conceptual criteria, or adopt a shared understanding of what ASEAN's goals and roles are. Yet they both understandable and attest to the growing richness and diversity of perspectives on ASEAN studies. They should be welcomed.

Bibliography


**ASEAN at 40: Mid-Life Rejuvenation?**

As it celebrates its 40th anniversary, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, founded in Bangkok on 8 August 1967 by the foreign ministers of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines and Singapore, evokes both pessimism and hope. Skeptics see the organization as increasingly irrelevant in the post-Cold War milieu, unable to confront the new enemies of a globalized world: currency speculators, pandemic viruses, and shadowy terrorist groups. To its harshest critics, ASEAN is little more than a quarrelsome bunch of peripheral nations too beholden to a 19th century view of national sovereignty to organize effective multilateral cooperation and build a regional identity.

Yet, ASEAN has been one of the most durable examples of regional multilateralism, one that commands attention and respect from regional organizations in other parts of the developing world. It acts as the hub, if not the leader, of regional multilateral forums in the wider Asia Pacific region. The fact that the most powerful nations of the Asia Pacific region, including China, the US and India, show deference to ASEAN by coming to these forums, means that ASEAN does matter.
ASEAN’s positive image was built around four areas of accomplishment in the first three decades of its life. The first was its ability to survive as Asia’s only multipurpose regional organization, after the failed experiments in pan-Asian regional institution-building initiated by India and China. Second, although border skirmishes have occurred (notably between Thailand and Burma in 2001) and bilateral territorial disputes and political tensions persist (notably between Singapore and Malaysia), no ASEAN member has engaged a fellow ASEAN member in major armed confrontation since 1967.

Third, ASEAN’s could take justifiable credit for bringing the decade-long Cambodia conflict, caused by the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia in 1979, to the negotiating table and finally to a peace agreement. ASEAN’s adversary in the conflict, Vietnam, is now a valued member of the organization.

Moreover, as the Cold War ended, it was ASEAN which provided the platform for building wider regional institutions that would engage a rising China and other major players of the Asia Pacific region. Without ASEAN’s neutral facilitating role, China might not have joined the ASEAN Regional Forum, established in 1994 as the only official multilateral security forum for the Asia Pacific region.

But then came a series of setbacks, triggered by the Asian financial crisis of 1997. The crisis severely crippled the economies of three of ASEAN’s founding members, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, and toppled the Suharto regime, ASEAN’s de facto leader and guiding hand. It also dashed the hopes of its new members, Vietnam, Laos, Burma, and Cambodia for reaping the economic benefits of membership, such as increased foreign investment flows, much of which was diverted to China. Not only did ASEAN fail to offer an effective response to the crisis, to make matters worse, its members, particularly Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, quarreled among themselves over seemingly trivial territorial and political issues when they should be giving each other a helping hand.

Although regional economies have recovered from the crisis to some extent, ASEAN faces new challenges. It can hardly match the immense economic dynamism of China and India. Its policy of “constructive engagement” with Burma has failed to persuade the junta there to liberalize its draconian hold on power. ASEAN seemed powerless in the face of severe air pollution in Southeast Asian skies caused by forest fires in Indonesia, which has become an annual health hazard in the region. They have left their bilateral disputes to simmer. The “ASEAN Way” of informal networking has thus far trumped demands for institutionalization and legalization of cooperation. Even old ASEAN hands, like the Eminent Persons’ Group that has recommended principles and mechanisms for an ASEAN Charter, acknowledge that ASEAN members often do not comply with their multilateral commitments or implement decisions collectively arrived at.

Although the vision of an ASEAN Security Community, proposed in 2002 by newly democratic Indonesia and officially adopted by ASEAN a year later endorses “a just, democratic and harmonious environment” for Southeast Asia, there is no policy instrument in place to discourage democratic backsliding or coups in the manner of the Inter-American Democratic Charter of the Organization of American States. This was evident in ASEAN’s non-response to the military coup in Thailand last year that ousted elected Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Although Indonesia and Malaysia did settle their maritime territorial dispute through arbitration, it was done through the International Court of Justice, rather than ASEAN’s own High Council of Foreign Ministers that is supposed to perform such a role. The Spratly Islands dispute with China has been set
aside, but this is mainly because Beijing is focusing on economic self-empowerment and the Taiwan problem, and hence needs to keep its quarrels with ASEAN down through its new “charm offensive”. On a more hopeful note, ASEAN did a credible job of organizing regional cooperation (including China) against the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003. Its response to terrorism, including cooperation undertaken informally and at bilateral levels, has begun to yield results. In recent months, ASEAN members have shown a growing impatience with the lack of political reform in Burma. The selection of Surin Pitsuwan to be the next secretary-general of ASEAN is both a welcome move and ironic. It was Surin, who as the Thai Foreign Minister in 1998, advocated a policy of “flexible engagement”, which called for ASEAN to set aside the non-interference mindset and deal with domestic issues which threaten regional stability and well-being, precisely the kind of issues ASEAN faces in Burma or Indonesia.

Responding to criticisms that the old ASEAN Way no longer works, the organization is embarking on a serious effort at institutional reform and strengthening. The ASEAN Charter, a constitutional document which will be ready by the end of this year, is a key part of this process. In its report issued last December, The EPG on the ASEAN Charter, technically a non-governmental body, has up with some pretty bold ideas. Among them are formal dispute-settlement mechanisms in all areas of cooperation, especially economic and political areas. Another proposal is to institute decision-making by majority voting, rather than by consensus, which have been blamed for ASEAN’s inertia and lowest common denominator approach, in non-sensitive areas (meaning, excluding security and foreign policy issues). The EPG also recommends steps to monitor compliance with ASEAN’s objectives, principles, decisions, agreements, and timetables. Members who are in "serious breach" of them can be subjected to sanctions, which might include loss of membership rights and privileges, or, in extraordinary circumstances, expulsion. The report mentions the long-term vision for an ASEAN Union. Yet, not all these recommendations will see the light of the day. When the governments got their hands on the EPG report, its recommendation for sanction mechanisms was quickly jettisoned, suggesting a continuing reluctance among members to dilute state sovereignty.

Another important direction taken by ASEAN is to pursue the vision of an East Asian community. This was partly due to its disillusionment with the perceived lack of US support to member countries affected by the 1997 financial crisis, and a desire to socialize China and to secure from it a greater commitment and contribution to the regional public good. But the idea faces powerful obstacles. The persisting rivalry between Japan and China is not amenable to ASEAN’s mediation. Differences exist among ASEAN members and China over the participation of non-East Asian nations. Although Australia, New Zealand and India were invited to the East Asian Summit, thanks to lobbying by Japan and Singapore, this does not settle the scope of the East Asian Community, since China still wants to develop such a Community without the involvement of non-East Asian nations, including the US.

Is ASEAN then heading towards irrelevance or is it reinventing itself? ASEAN’s infatuation with Westphalian sovereignty, its addiction to the ASEAN Way, and its tolerance for authoritarianism, are major liabilities. But there is no challenger in sight to its role as the hub of regional multilateral diplomacy. History is on its side. No great power in history has successfully developed a permanent regional association in Asia under its umbrella. The association is waking up to its institutional deficiencies and trying to chart a new direction. In a conversation with the author, Tommy Koh, renowned Singaporean diplomat and a member of the inter-governmental committee drafting the ASEAN Charter, asserted that “ASEAN is indeed reinventing itself.” Responding to unfavorable comparisons between the European Union and ASEAN, he quipped: “The European Union is an inspiration, but not a model.” ASEAN will never become, and does not aspire to become, the European
Union of the East. It is a more inclusive and culturally tolerant body than the EU, if Turkey’s experience in seeking EU membership is any guide. But success in drafting a charter and carrying out its provisions poses a crucial test for ASEAN. And here hopefully it will not follow the EU’s constitution-making footsteps.

\textsuperscript{1} ‘Penyusunan Piagam ASEAN bertujuan untuk mentransformasikan ASEAN dari sebuah asosiasi politik yang longgar menjadi organisasi internasional yang memiliki \textit{legal personality}, berdasarkan aturan yang profesional (\textit{rule-based organization}), serta memiliki struktur organisasi yang efektif dan efisien’. ASEAN Selayang Pandang (Jakarta: Direktorat Jenderal Kerjasama ASEAN, Departemen Luar Negeri, Republik Indonesia, 2007), p.30.

\textsuperscript{ii} The lower house of the Indonesian legislature (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat), through its Komisi I (First Commission) has been quite active in seeking to influence Indonesian official policy towards Burma. As befits a democratic institution, its members have, in their meetings with Indonesian ministries, proposed policies that range from strongly opposing Burma’s military regime to treading cautiously in dealing with the Junta for geopolitical reasons (mainly being wary of attempts by powers like India and China to take advantage of a prolonged domestic turmoil in Burma). See ‘Komisi I Berbeda Pandangan Soal Sikapi Myanmar’, Kompas, 1 October 2007.